Do Women Enjoy a Political Advantage? Majority Position and Democratic Justice[1]

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ABSTRACT

Philippe Van Parijs suggests that there might be a political inequality in favor of women, taken as a group, stemming both from their life expectancy and their supposed higher participation in elections due to their higher level of education. He also wonders about the status of this inequality. Is it advantageous? Is it unjust? Does it partially counterbalance other disadvantages or injustices? This papers starts by assessing and qualifying the alleged inequality from an empirical perspective. It then considers Van Parijs' normative questions and argues that we should not consider the inequality as an advantage, nor an injustice, because mere membership in a majority group cannot plausibly be judged so. Where women have strong common interests, they have no power; where they have electoral power, they have no overarching common interests.

Keywords: Political equality, gender equality, life expectancy, education, democratic justice

INTRODUCTION

In his provocative and stimulating paper on gender inequalities, Philippe Van Parijs discusses four puzzles. I focus on the third, which concerns an alleged political inequality in favor of women, taken as a group, stemming both from their life expectancy and their supposed higher participation in elections due to their higher level of education. Van Parijs recognizes that, all things considered, women suffer many more disadvantages than men, but wonders about the status of this inequality: is it advantageous? Is it

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unjust? Does it partially counterbalance other disadvantages or injustices? I argue that we should not consider this inequality as an advantage, nor an injustice, because mere membership in a majority group cannot plausibly be judged so.

1. A GENERAL PUZZLE ABOUT THESE PUZZLES

Before considering Van Parijs' puzzle, I feel I should say a more general word about the questioned appropriateness of his paper, if only because it has engendered offended reactions. I have found around me that most men considered the puzzles amusing and stimulating, whereas most women found them inappropriate, if not stupid. It is certainly easier to discourse with lightness over the possible advantages of being a woman when you do not experience everyday domination nor bear the symbolic weight of an enduring oppression. Therefore, even though I agree with Van Parijs that the questions he raises are "worth asking" (Van Parijs 2015: 88) and take this puzzle as an invitation to reflect upon the interesting issue of democratic justice, I also agree with several of his critics that the puzzles are of little practical relevance and therefore somewhat odd in the writings of such a *philosophe engagé*.

2. THE EXTENT OF GENDER POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Van Parijs makes two empirical hypotheses. First, that women form a *potential* majority in all constituencies with universal suffrage where they enjoy longer life expectancy. Although men are more numerous at birth almost everywhere in the world, it is true that women outnumber them in the population of most advanced democracies, such as Western Europe and North America. By contrast, the sex ratio tends to be reversed in Africa and Asia.[2] Second, he suggests that this unequal balance of electoral power might be increased by a larger participation of women in elections, thanks to their higher level of education in several countries. This is more controversial.

It has generally proven true in the history of democracy that the level of education increases electoral turnout (Norris 2004: 175). The correlation between education and women's turnout is expressed by the fact that in developed countries, where they are likely to have a more equal access to education, the gender gap has disappeared: women participate in elections

2 See the CIA's "World Factbook" https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html

at least as much as men (Norris 2002).[3] In contrast, in newer democracies, where unexamined religious norms and/or sexist social norms reducing women's educational opportunities tend to be more pervasive, women's turnout to elections is lower. In recent history, though, there seems to be a clear secular trend, expressed in the generational variations in women's turnout (Norris 2002) and political orientation (Stevens 2007: 52-58).

Is it then the case that, in contexts where women are on average more highly educated, the inequality in electoral turnout is reinforced? Not really. In advanced democracies, with the exceptions of the United States and Switzerland – which sometimes alter the general picture–, education seems to have almost no effect anymore on turnout (Przeworski 2010: 94).

The impact of education on electoral participation is generally higher in less affluent countries, which usually show less gender equality and less female participation in elections.[4] Therefore, where the impact of education on turnout is high, women might not otherwise enjoy high turnout or a higher level of education. What is more, even where higher education does increase turnout, a reversed tendency might counterbalance it, as a low education profile seems to affect women's (lower) turnout much more than men's (Norris 2002).

In sum, the accumulation of the two advantages envisioned by Van Parijs – participation and education – is plausible in the U.S., and possibly Switzerland, yet much less elsewhere. This does not affect his hypothesis that longer life expectancy might constitute a political advantage, but it restricts the extent of the supposed inequality of political power.

Now, what could somewhat increase the plausibility of Van Parijs' claim is the amusing fact that "surveys find more people saying that they have voted than the actual polling figures confirm" (Stevens 2007: 49) and "men are slightly more likely than women to misrepresent having gone to the polls" (Verba *et al.* 1997: 1054). This, however, is unlikely to increase significantly women's actual electoral power.

A more promising path for Van Parijs could be to consider the effects of age on turnout, which used to worry him (Van Parijs 2011). As he knows, older people tend to vote more than younger people (Norris 2004: 125; Van Parijs 2011: 35). And contrary to what he seems to assume (Van Parijs 2015), the ratio of elderly women to elderly men is higher than the ratio of women to men at younger ages (CIA 2014; Casal 2015). In light of developed democracy's

3 They often have more or less equal rates of turnout, and as they often outnumber men in those societies, they often (yet not always) outnumber them in elections.

4 This with reservations, as little information is available about turnout rates broken down by sex. See Norris 2002.

tendency to face an ageing population, one might thus think that the imbalance of electoral power is increasing in the West. However, the sex differential in life expectancy is now narrowing with the years in developed countries after having peaked between 1970 and 1980 (Glei and Horiuchi 2007). So, while differences in turnout according to age may slightly increase the imbalance of electoral power, ageing will probably not.

Political action, however, is not reducible to participation in elections.[5] This brings in another reason for tempering Van Parijs' hypothesis that women could enjoy some political advantage. It seems that "[w]ith respect to most forms of political activity other than voting, women are slightly less active than men" (Verba *et al.* 1997: 1053).[6] This comes from the fact that they generally have less resources to spend on political activity than men, but also that they have on average less interest in – and knowledge about – politics. This difference, it appears, "persist[s] at each educational level" (1060), and can be explained both by their perception of politics as a man's game – their interest and knowledge increase in constituencies with female (potential) representatives – and a gender differentiated political education. In addition to this, their lower participation in the workforce also negatively affects women's engagement with politics in the broader sense *(et al.* 2001: 198-218).

Finally, the potential electoral advantage cannot be taken in isolation from the rest of the process characterized by a marked underrepresentation of women in parliaments, local government, media, or lobbying. Elections constitute only a part of politics and turnout does not amount to political engagement. Rather than a political inequality in favor of women, it would thus be more appropriate to talk about a potential electoral inequality in their favor or, more precisely, a potential inequality in active suffrage, dwarfed by an unfavorable inequality along most other dimensions of influential political action.

5 This is not denied by Van Parijs, but somewhat obscured by his tendency to use a Schumpeterian model of democracy. See Van Parijs 2011.

6 Marien et al. (2010) recently arrived to the opposite conclusion, using a broader data set than Burns, Schlozman and Verba, who mainly focused on the US. More cross-country investigation would be necessary. Yet what seems to account for the difference is mainly a different understanding of political participation. Marien, Hooghe and Quintelier conclude that women are more active in non-electoral politics because they consider charity donations and products boycotting – both performed more often by women than men – as important "participation acts." Yet it seems to be in activities producing influence on institutionalized politics (party membership, party meetings, direct contacts with politicians) that women are generally less active than men – except for signing petitions (Marien *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, if you consider the money invested in political action beside the time dedicated to it, the imbalance of influence in favor of men becomes more apparent (Burns *et al.* 2001: 68).

3. IS THIS INEQUALITY UNJUST? IS IT EVEN AN ADVANTAGE?

Having a qualified picture of the extent of the (potential) inequality in active suffrage in favor of women, we can consider its normative implications.

If the inequality in active suffrage is only caused by an unequal use of an equal opportunity to vote, one might argue that there is no injustice. For there being *procedural* injustice, one needs to trace back the unequal turnout to unequal opportunities. When men's turnout is lower than women's, it might be because they are on average younger and less educated. Life expectancy does not affect men's opportunities to vote, since at each age, all other things being equal, they have equal opportunities to do so. What about their lower educational achievements? They cannot plausibly stem from unequal educational opportunities, but they might result from unequal educational abilities. If this were the case, one may argue that this involves some procedural injustice in countries where education has an impact on turnout. This small disadvantage, however, would be cancelled by all the other advantages politically enjoyed by men, which provide them many more opportunities of political influence than women. Moreover, if women's higher educational achievements are due to unequal opportunities in the job market (Mora 2015), men suffer neither unequal educational opportunities nor unequal voting opportunities, and there is no procedural injustice.

Van Parijs seems nevertheless more concerned with people's use of their votes than with procedural justice. What he invites us to consider are the implications of being in a majority or minority position in a constituency. Here the problem is not procedural. That women have more power because they are more numerous is procedurally irreproachable: it is the very implication of the basic principle of political equality – one person, one vote. The worry is that they could turn this numerical advantage into a *substantial* injustice. Van Parijs' approach is radically consequentialist, as illustrated by his past discussion of the disenfranchisement of the elderly (Van Parijs 2011: 31-66).

To be member of a minority group cannot by itself be considered as an injustice, but a minority position makes groups more vulnerable to injustices. As people differ along many lines in characteristics, we are all potentially members of a minority group. What can be considered as democratically unjust – or can lead to substantive injustices – is to have political institutions

arranged in such a way that majority groups are allowed to exert domination over minorities.[7] But domination should not be understood here as Philip Pettit (2012) does. According to him, it is sufficient for there being domination that one agent has the possibility or power to arbitrarily interfere with the choices and actions of another. Yet such understanding of domination is of little use for exploring democratic justice in group relationships because virtually all potential majorities dominate potential minorities. Ian Shapiro, for example, defends a conception of domination that is more useful for our purpose. He suggests that having the capacity to interfere with people's basic interests "does not itself constitute domination; rather it creates the potential for domination" (Shapiro 2012: 324).[8]

What matters for democratic justice is therefore to assess the plausibility of the threat that one group will take advantage of a favorable balance of power to actually dominate another by systematically favoring its own interests at the expense of the other's. It is the case, for example, when an ethnic group outnumbers another one towards which it is hostile, or because the employed largely outnumber the unemployed. There you find ground for justifying constitutionally protected rights for minorities, in order to avoid this specific kind of domination. To the contrary, we do not consider people with blue eyes as disadvantaged because in a minority, as it is unlikely that they are going to suffer a political disadvantage because of this imbalance of power. They can take part in multiple more plausible majority coalitions, as does the minority sometimes formed by men. I mean by this that it will prove easy for men, as for the blue-eyed, to build a coalition of interests or convictions cross-cutting sexes and eye color.

Now, it seems quite implausible to consider the fact that women generally outnumber men as an advantage, because where they could take advantage of their number, they lack the interest in doing so. The only common interest of women which could bring them together despite the diversity of their socio-economic interests and their diverging values is the avoidance of male domination. This explains general progresses towards more gender equality since the advent of universal suffrage. Yet, in the countries where they are the most oppressed – say, Saudi Arabia –, women are not allowed to vote. In oppressive democracies, where they are entitled to vote but lack education

7 I say "democratically unjust" because social injustices are not reducible to domination. Nevertheless, contrary to a just society, a just democracy cannot eliminate all kinds of unfair advantages. Politically relevant majorities will always enjoy an advantage – stemming from the inescapable use of majority rule –, which it should be the aim to minimize, at least in such a way as to reduce political domination.

8 As Shapiro suggests, Pettit's understanding of domination "partly accounts for [his] schizoid attitude toward the state" (Shapiro 2012: 321), as it pushes him to defend multiple veto players that can lead to a political stand still.

and freedom of conscience, they can vote but either do it less than men – see India –, or do it against their common interest – be it under the pressure of their male relatives or because they have internalized some oppressive ideology. Only in countries where they have equal access to education and are freed from ideological domination could they use their number as an advantage and "convert [it] into an even greater inequality in their favor" (Van Parijs 2015: 85). But in those contexts, their common interest – reducing male domination – does not seem strong enough to offset their divergent interests and values.[9]

Take the U.S. as an example. Since the 80s, contrary to their previous tendency, women have tended to support Democrats more than men at every election (Stevens 2007: 55-56). Moreover, since 1964, women systematically outnumber men in presidential elections, with a difference reaching 7.2 million votes in 1996 (Norris 2002).[10] One could then wonder why Republicans do not adapt their programs – on reproductive issues for example – to catch more female votes. Such an intuition seems to be endorsed by Van Parijs when he says that "on the assumption that the electorate is not stupid or blind, [the representatives], whether women or men, will only be elected and re-elected if the policies they propose or adopt match the preferences of the female majority" (Van Parijs 2015: 84). Yet the latter preferences vary along many dimensions and are not sufficiently tied together to make women's votes an attractive specific target for Republicans. Conflicts of economic interests and (religious) values largely dominate the competition for votes. Targeting one gender group at the expense of consistency regarding those more sensible issues is risky for both parties. Women, as everyone, assign priorities to some political goals over others, and seldom are their special interests – those they share only with women – on top of the list. This probably explains why historical attempts to create women's parties "have generally proved short-lived" (Stevens 2007: 100).

For all these reasons, it seems implausible to characterize the larger number of women among voters as an actual advantage, and even more as an injustice. It could be advantageous for them in a hypothetical world with full consciousness of their common interests and no division along other lines. Then, only, would we have to take it seriously and possibly design institutions in such a way as to reduce their possibilities of turning this

9 What is more, these countries have generally adopted strong anti-discrimination laws which undermine the possibility of a domination of men by women. These laws do not make male domination disappear, as it is rooted in pervasive social norms, but they would most probably impede new forms of domination. Political power is not unchecked.

10 This could be due both to demography and education, as the latter does have an effect on turnout in the US.

advantage into an injustice.[11] In the meantime, men can sleep soundly.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the electoral power imbalance between men and women is a fact in advanced democracies, yet not very significant – contrary to Van Parijs' hypothesis –, and to be considered alongside a reversed power imbalance along other dimensions of political action neglected by his argument. Then I have claimed that for a majority to exert political domination, and thus turn a numerical advantage into an unjust democratic advantage, it needs power and overarching common interests. Where women have strong common interests, they have no power; where they have electoral power, they no longer have overarching common interests. The fact that they constitute a potential electoral majority is thus unlikely to constitute an injustice someday nor to counterbalance (even modestly) other political disadvantages – such as the fact that women are underrepresented, less politically stimulated, and have fewer resources for political engagement.

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11 Note that this hypothetical power imbalance might bring, overall, more justice, as it seems that most crimes and injustices are committed by men (Casal 2011; Pinker 2011), and Van Parijs argued elsewhere (Van Parijs 2011) that we should opt for the democratic arrangement most favorable to justice, even at the cost of political equality.

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